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Act 6: A Sixth Sense?

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**Act 6:
A Sixth Sense?**

Nearly every day at work, I jog around Campus Lake. A leafy canopy filters the early morning light as a cool mist rises amidst the bright flecks of sun on the water. Dry leaves, algae'd inlets, and loblolly pines scent the autumn air. Because the Mississippi is not far away, the Canadian geese honk on the flyway headed south; the waggling mallards along the shore will soon join them. I still taste the breakfast coffee now salted with sweat from my upper lip. Eyes stinging, heart rushing, lungs heaving, I finish in a sprint on soft, wet grass glowing from the lingering summer in the soil.

The fall is a generous season in southern Illinois. It reminds me of the places I have run over the years, though not always in such fine weather. The same sensations occur in vastly different locales. In Boston winters, it is hard not to slip on the icy sidewalks. In early spring, the Oklahoma wheat greens up before the wind billows it into waves of straw. In the summer, the vineyard hillsides outside of Freiburg are not yet ready for harvest; the earliest grapes, aluminous and hard, cluster tightly on the vine. Most of all, however, the fall reminds me of running in exurban Silver Spring; the trees, the air, the sun, the hills, the geese, even the infrequent snowfalls are much as they are in Makanda township, home back home (ill. 13).

A jogger for 50 years, I have taken many routes. Some traced the sands of the Aegean in Nea Makri and of the Pacific in La Jolla; others followed the princely paths of Edinburgh and the highest levies of New Orleans, which resemble the broad ways along the Main in Frankfurt. Of distant spaces, I prefer the parks of Paris: the prim and crowded Luxembourg, the steep Buttes Chaumont, the expansive Champs de Mars, and my favorite, the southside Montsouris. This inclined course near the *cité universitaire* is filled with

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Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a
peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and
walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to
each.

– T.S. Eliot (1917)



swift-footed students, the fairest of them sporting designer outfits and the scents of fashionable *eau de cologne*, a source of inspiration on the uphill.

One notable feature of this Parisian park is a pond filled with waterfowl. Swans, geese, ducks, herons, egrets, and many less familiar birds nest on a small island opposite the northeast entrance. Graceful branches of lanceolate leaves from sweet chestnuts and European beeches frame the small refuge across the water. Passing by this point, I have often thought of the elusive duck blind that Grandfather Allen built on the Aspatuck estuary by Westhampton. No one took me to see it when I was young. As Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, “My heart in hiding stirred for a bird, the achieve of, the mastery of the thing.” That is probably just as well; I might have been disappointed and then found less mystery to the Parc Montsouris and its bucolic avatars.

The links between short- and long-term memories suggest still more connections, like those between sensory experience and less accessible manners of knowing. The physicality of running, its compression of time and space offer another approach to oneself and one’s surroundings. As all five senses are engaged, indeed heightened by exercise, a sixth reveals alternatives to mere empirical reality. The body’s own rhyme and reason, under the right circumstances, propose a present informed by intuition, perception, and, dare I say, faith. One senses possibilities, beyond the here and now, in communities of being in the natural world. They, too, add meaning to memory.

It is no accident that these reflections arise in higher education. The very word “university” signifies a realm of learning, to be sure, but also of learners who come together in quest of something better for themselves. They do so in an appropriate milieu, what John Henry Newman meant by the Latin “studium generale,” which owes much

to the collective endeavors of individuals – families, neighbors, professionals – in another community redefined here by nature itself. The pond and the pastimes it invites, besides the fleeting pleasures of a morning run, represent a larger moment for the school, one ap-
positely situated to expand its initial, more provincial mission.

Like the Atlantic and its populous beaches – or like Walden Pond and the inhabi-
tants of Concord – Campus Lake and the university exist apart and yet in sustaining re-
lationships. Students and faculty are virtual, migratory creatures, regularly bringing vari-
ety to this ecological niche; and when they abscond, they carry with them their encoun-
ters in a microcosm variously networked, as it is, to a wider universe. Waves of innova-
tion, akin to seasonal rains, saturate and revive this spot with resources from still further
away. “No man is an island entire to itself”; no pond rests apart; no institution grows by
itself. This boundless site and its timeless cycles posit some noteworthy stories on the
run, if you will, through the hippocampus to deep memory and even deeper emotion.

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Southern Illinois is an unlikely place for a university. The Ozarks stretch across
the poorest part of the state, pocked by the ponds left by former surface mining for coal,
far from the economic pull of Chicago. Local prosperity, what little existed, owed most to
the traffic in people and goods up and down the Mississippi and east-west along the Ohio.
South of the prairie, this land between the rivers is rolling and wooded, the home of the
Shawnee National Forest named after a tribe from the eastern Ohio valley in the centuries
after the Cahokia civilization. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark noted the region’s
isolation in 1803. The cultural norms remain of the upland, antebellum South where es-
caped slaves, such as Huckleberry’s Jim, were not safe until they had moved further north

to Springfield and beyond. In 1858 the audience backed Stephen Douglas in his debate with Abraham Lincoln in Jonesboro just north of Cairo, still pronounced like a brand of corn syrup, where Charles Dickens lost his shirt in real estate speculation.

Southern Illinois Normal College was founded in Carbondale, an Illinois Central railway depot, right after the Civil War (1869). It enrolled two African Americans in its inaugural class of 37. As with teacher training elsewhere in the state, it arose in the shadow of the better-known, land-grant school, the University of Illinois (U of I). The tidal wave of veterans on the GI Bill after World War II transformed the normal college into a regional university, though it never ceased preparing instructors for the area.

One by one, Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) added academic programs, including graduate degrees and campuses in Springfield and Edwardsville near St. Louis. The legislature showered its largesse on these projects to stimulate the local economy, especially when President Delyte Morris (1948-1970) planned an educational institution second only to the flagship in Urbana-Champaign. By the time Morris retired, suffering as he did the first signs of Alzheimer's disease, SIUC had tripled its enrollments, from less than seven thousand to more than twenty thousand.

The 1960s were an exciting time in Carbondale. As the university grew, erecting new buildings and hiring new faculty, it developed its own unbridled character. Much of campus was constructed in less than a decade; and with the raw concrete of Faner Hall, it looked it. Morris personally lured creative luminaries, such as Buckminster Fuller and Marjorie Lawrence, for prolonged stints in residence. At one point the library, named after Morris, had an acquisitions budget in the humanities larger than the U of I's. Students were politically involved when national issues, like the war in Vietnam, intersected with

Comment [1]: Charles Dickens

In his American Notes (1842), Charles Dickens expressed a jaundiced view of all Americans, not just from southern Illinois. Besides loathing slavery and its abhorrent brutalities, he was stung by egregious infringements of his authorial property-rights. His books were sold everywhere in the US, but he received not a penny from their purchase. So by the time he reached Cairo, where he had gambled away a goodly sum in risky land deals, Dickens was not well disposed to what he saw there: "a hot-bed of disease, an ugly sepulchre, a grave uncheered by any gleam of promise; a place without one single quality, in earth or air or water, to commend it." He clearly knew little of life between the rivers.

local ones, like parietal hours in the dormitories. Blacks lived onsite, an oasis of interracial accommodation, long before Civil Rights legislation mandated it.

“Even today,” mused John Gardner wistfully in 1973, “nobody arrives at and nobody escapes from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale by accident.” This oft-quoted phrase was a rare accolade from the noted novelist, who earned a raise despite his errant confabulations. The speedy growth and unrestrained optimism, which pervaded Morris’s enlightened despotism, came to an abrupt halt when his successor, David Derge, oversaw the summary dismissal of 104 staff members, not quite sure what money would be saved in doing so. Notwithstanding Derge’s arrogant incapacity – he was president for two years but plodded on, an overpaid professor, for another twenty – Morris’s legacy remained because the university could not give it up. With dwindling state support over the years, it almost succeeded.

“The calculated recklessness of it” endured at a school “unburdened by tradition or any debilitating sense of its own importance,” in a “country so beautiful you wonder that people would leave it outdoors,” as Gardner likened Mark Twain’s literary conceit. So it would be until better things happened. SIUC is an institution with a future far less promising than its past, however much better a place it is to work now than it was when Morris stepped down soon after a scandal erupted over the building still named after W. Clement Stone, a confidant and benefactor of untimely generosity. The faculty actually does more than teach and chair committees to merit tenure and promotion; the ambitious provost Frank Horton fixed that in 1978 when the school finally proved itself worthy of the delta’s delectable peaches and river-bending earthquakes.

Since then SIUC has consolidated. It serves today fewer than eighteen thousand on-campus students enrolled in a broader inventory of respectable, some nationally ranked degree programs. The freewheeling curriculum has been subjected to peer review and accreditation. Moreover, the faculty has turned its interests to research to sustain a growing graduate school. It is remarkable to note the increased productivity of the university's many scholars, who are no longer a small, transient elite but an enduring presence. Awards have recognized the likes of Charles Fanning in Irish Studies, Larry Hickman on John Dewey, and Rodney Jones in poetry. So the Morris heritage lives on in ways more visible to professionals than to the public – or to the pupils who seem to persist ever so placidly in another kingdom of their own.

In 1991 when Anne and I arrived in Carbondale – population 25,597 during intermissions – we were drawn by the cachet of our new colleagues. Helmut Liedloff, the author of the most widely used German textbooks in the country, was still on staff. Harvey Gardiner had just retired from decades of distinguished scholarship on Latin America. I was hired to replace Henry Vyverberg and Stan Zucker, the former in intellectual history, the latter in social history, both of modern Europe. I would not do as well as they, but I felt honored to succeed them and to complement Arnold Barton on France since 1789. After more than a decade of retrenchment, the Department of History was authorized to recruit talented, younger hands, such as Chen Jian who later accepted endowed chairs at the University of Virginia and Cornell; his career debuted at SIUC.

The historical profession did not originate or conclude in Carbondale. From here, I have been in fruitful conversation with mentors across the country. I have already mentioned Bob Nye at the University of Oklahoma, now emeritus from an endowed chair at

Oregon State. His scholarly passions defined new fields of inquiry. But I must also mention other American scholars of modern France and beyond: Karen Offen at Stanford, Robert Darnton at Harvard, Steven Hause at Washington in St. Louis, and Jim Johnson at Boston (whose summer meal at the Place des Vosges my wife and I still recall fondly). Because of our mutual concerns, these historians provided far more stimulation than my officemates in Carbondale (except when we brawled); frequent professional meetings, international travel, and the new communications technology saw to that.

In this context I have come to learn that individuals make a university's reputation, not the other way around. Such a lesson is fraught for fresh-faced faculty and students; they often identify with the school because of what others have made of it. In their maturation, they realize that for an institution to thrive everyone must contribute. Its privilege is not an entitlement; it is earned one book, one grant, one prize, one graduate at a time. Here lies the locus of our cultural capital in which we all share. Europeans have understood this purpose for founding the first universities in the tenth century. A millennium later and an ocean away from the Parisian Latin Quarter, it is just as true here in the American Midwest.

The best revenge may be living well, but any scholar intent upon the "high life" will not find it in the professoriate, notwithstanding the cynical counsels of Marcel Pagnol's jaded erstwhile professor, Monsieur Topaze: "le mépris des proverbes c'est le commencement de la fortune." Deliberative communities of collective effort, such as our most precious resources in higher education, are ill-suited to consumer society's appeals to lucre, luxury, and leisure. As Goethe's Faust might have termed misplaced material obsessions, the insidious "Ramada Inn" syndrome now replicates the "Ozzie and Harriet"

effect of our parents' day. There is much to be said instead for the quality of life, the intellectual's prerogatives, as they are understood overseas. In his bizarre and byzantine affectations, Jean-Paul Sartre, for one, praised the pursuit far more than he pawed its prey.

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“And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche,” wrote Geoffrey Chaucer of the unworldly clerk. The joys of discovery are declared with delight and not solely in academe. But we owe to the presence of our students in the university the tuition they pay for our work on their behalf. Our relationship with them is inherently reciprocal. Because of their needs as well as their bounty, we are obliged to imbue them with our learning. Scholarship without a broader audience is not scholarship at all; it is self-indulgence. A Kantian pedagogical imperative informs what we do, what others like me do. The very best of us are teacher-scholars who profess in the classroom with the same zeal and attention they devote to their publications. It is more than a moral duty, of course; it is a happy one.

I have found many unexpectedly satisfying – and not so satisfying – moments on the job. Students make them happen; the semester changes in the presence of each new cadre. In more than thirty years in the academy, the very best course I have ever taught – “Western Civilization since 1715” in fall 1995 – and the very worst course I have ever taught – the identical syllabus in the following spring – owed most to the pupils who had registered. The first term I rejoiced in thoughtful, well-informed brilliance; the second term I despaired of thoughtless, ignorant stupidity. The first class was a pleasure to lead; I was inspired. The second class was misery itself; I had failed. But I benefited more in failure than in inspiration.

In the midst of my misery, Jamal Hooks, a sly-witted history-education major, in-

Comment [2]: The Philosopher

Simone de Beauvoir stated of Jean-Paul Sartre, her long-time companion, “il n’est pas passionné par la sexualité. C’est un homme chaleureux, vivant, en tout sauf au lit.” For him, preliminaries were everything. This curious, cursory observation appears in a letter to Nelson Algren, for some years Beauvoir’s closest connection to the American Midwest (Algren lived in Chicago, but figures as Lewis Brogan in his paramour’s *roman à clef*, Les Mandarins, otherwise set in Paris). The passage intimates that Existentialist philosophy, whatever its ethical shortcomings, really does live up to its most famous slogan: “l’existence précède l’essence.” I thank fellow Francophile Frank Gunderson for the reference to Beauvoir’s missive and for the opportunity to discuss her affinities for the US. I am not sure from which philosopher I have learned the most – Beauvoir, Sartre, or Gunderson.

terrupted a discussion of Voltaire's famous line in Candide, "Il faut cultiver notre jardin." "Professor Allen, sir, don't you think that racism is more central to Western civilization?" I had no ready answer. His query, worthy of Mahatma Gandhi, may have been tangential to my professional training and research expertise, but it was hardly tangential to Jamal's needs and experience. He adhered to the tenets of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam on the south side of Chicago; he felt impelled to challenge the institutions I represented. Although he would eventually become a music impresario with a presence on the web, he forced me, rightly so, to re-think my courses in modern European history.

I now understand that I have people to reach not just erudition to flaunt. My pupils at a public university very nearly resemble the population elsewhere in the state, with a few notable differences (the enrollment is disproportionately young, male, non-Hispanic, and from lower-middle income families). I need to consider who they are, not just what I know. As higher education democratizes with state and federal support – or so we hope – it means the presence of more students, like my questioner, whose instruction, if it is to be effective, must touch their lives. And so I find myself talking more about the gendered, ethnic, and racial implications of the Enlightenment, for instance. As a consequence, I am a better teacher and my charges are better learners.

Clearly it is not the deftest students I remember, probably for comparable reasons I am not the most adept instructor my students recall. Occasionally I receive affecting notes from aging alumni who tell me, years later, how I transfigured their lives, despite my dim memory of them. More often, I speak bemusedly of the outrageous figures who graced my classrooms, whose mental states, I am sure, required professional palliative care. Substance abuse and addiction, schizophrenia, bipolar and obsessive-compulsive

personality disorders – some of which I recognized, most of which I did not – all appeared over the years. However tragic, though hardly anomalous, they have been the source of consternation – and revelation.

One individual in particular – I will call him Don because he is still around – took two of my courses. Each time he did, I regretted it. His Asperger’s syndrome, a form of autism with all its complex physical tics and unpredictable interjections, was extremely disruptive because he sat upfront in view of everyone in the room. There was no way I could control his antics without ejecting him from our midst. Upon reflection, for the sake of the other students enrolled in the courses, I should have. He did not need higher education so much as better medication.

One day, Don arrived more agitated than usual. He could barely restrain his coughing behind the white surgeon’s mask over his face. Halfway through the hour, the victim of a vicious hacking fit, he rummaged through his knapsack, loudly rustling rump-pled papers and thumping dog-eared books, to clutch a huge flask of cough syrup, which he proceeded to chug, the facemask pushed atop his tilted head. The class gawked in awe as he slaked his thirst for this viscous liquor. Having downed the entire bottle to subdue his gasping at last, he repacked his backpack pensively, then burped beatifically before repositioning his elastic mask with a snap. Daft Don’s febrile performance far surpassed my own for the long minutes that he held center stage.

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Over the years, mostly by observing masters at their craft, such as Barbara Walvoord at Notre Dame and Doug Eder at Arizona State, I have learned a few things. Above all, I know, scholarship and instruction are necessary complements. The capable

researcher is an inspiring teacher, indeed the best, when the fervor for inquiry and creation is brought into the classroom. Effective teaching is not an innate ability inherited by a felicitous few, a tiny coterie; it is a consciously cultivated skill acquired by a consortium of consummate professionals. It strikes a sensible balance between conveying a body of knowledge and developing a manner of knowing, since command of a discipline results in both. All this, the product of experience and reflection, the conscientious mentor of undergraduate and graduate students understands.

At the heart of this sound notion, I think, lies an interpersonal etiquette; it is little more than (un)common courtesy. Professors must resist their instinctive inclination, which is to discourse at length on everything they know (or pretend to know) whether or not anyone is listening or much less cares. Oh, we can be such Casaubons, unconscionable pedants to torment the likes of an impressionable Dorothea Brooke or an incredulous Dr. Wagner. The result is mere rote not true learning. As a rule lectures have the least impact; just hours later, even with adequate notes, few folks can recall what they heard. The professor's oral activity does not get past the students' aural passivity. Far better learning occurs when minds appropriate mastery of the material and its applications, apart from the faculty foghorns and the inculcation of "inert ideas" that Alfred North Whitehead lamented 80 or so years ago.

Fortunately, a better kind of instruction is pervasive. It is actually the norm in small rooms, laboratories, studios, seminars, and other locales distanced from impersonal auditoria. Because of certain lackadaisical habits and a few huge classes – the most problematic sites at the university – we deem fit to pontificate on everything when, in fact, we should not. The vital interchange between pedagogue and pupil occurs in more

humane settings: office hours, coffee shops, playing fields, Internet blogs, and other spaces where everyone can become an active learner. An academic program consisting of these interactions makes possible the best teaching and learning. It is the magic of the university and its privileged opportunities for students as well as researchers, both pledged to a mutual quest to know and do well.

Since my days at Brown, I have tried variations on traditional curriculum and instruction. At Tufts I participated in a living-learning community focused on the complex significance of organic metaphors. If nothing else, the course was aptly named, “Roots and Growth.” At Phillips I helped refashion its general studies based on great artifacts in the Western tradition. Sad to say, it did not avert the school’s bankruptcy. At SIUC, with the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, I resorted to problem-based learning, an approach refined at the SIU School of Medicine. For two years, sixty undergraduates studied how not to learn, and not much else (one of them asked after I had quoted from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, “Is that a real poem, or did you make it up?”). They were grateful for the experience, I suppose, but its flaws do give one pause.

As a teacher now, I am less maladroit; I have learned from my mistakes. I no longer hold the floor more than ten minutes at a time and engage instead in Socratic dialogues about the assigned reading, on which my classes have written brief statements in answer to the principal question for the hour. At times, when the space allows, I divide students into groups to work collectively on closely related concerns. Their deliberations are then reported to the entire class for further dialogic discussion. Frequent quizzes, impromptu writing, and informal presentations promote more active probing of key issues in the course. The new instructional technology makes easier the use of audio-visual

Comment [3]: Problem-Based Learning

Problem-based learning (PBL) has developed into a widely-used pedagogy, thanks to the earnest efforts of colleagues at the University of Delaware and Samford University, national clearinghouses for PBL activities. PBL originated in the training of physicians at Canada’s McMaster University. In 1973 Howard Barrows brought the most radical version of the practice, as curriculum, to the SIU School of Medicine, which became a model for other medical schools. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation thought worthwhile our iteration of PBL in SIUC’s University Core Curriculum and bankrolled the project briefly while all other programs were in budgetary retrenchment. Unfortunately, the experiment was not retained, but the School of Medicine continues to use a variation of PBL.

materials, which for some of us are also essential to the grasp of critical concepts. This comprehension matters most, when, as learning strategies, passivity and anonymity gain no traction.

I have been most inspired by my colleagues' explicit appeals to dignity and self-respect. Thom Mitchell's market days in introductory economics, Pamela Smoot's collaborative learning in black history, and Meera Komarraju's careful integration of different media in psychology empower inexperienced pupils to seize responsibility for their own learning. My peers show them how in the context of disciplinary knowledge and thought, not in lieu of it. Their attention to students and their aspirations ensures that ultimately this regard is richly rewarded. What Henry James once advised novice writers, the best academics tell their charges, in so many words: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" Such solicitude, I find, works wonders in the wide swath of human potential.

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Originally, a thousand years ago, guilds protected the interests of instructors. In the Middle Ages, students often failed to fund their tuition, unqualified teachers competed for paying pupils, and city and church officials regulated scholastic business for their own aims. These problems and others analogous to them, in one form or another, remain. As legally recognized institutions with certain prerogatives like the granting of degrees, universities must protect the integrity of their operation. This imperative demands of the faculty considerable time to keep their house in order. If they fail to do so, someone else will do it for them – and not always very wisely. The resulting risk is sheer mayhem.

Such is the rationale for committees, such is the governance of institutions shared

between highly specialized but impractical faculty and a more practical but unspecialized administration. It does not require a chemist to preside at meetings, though chemists have tried and not done overly well, at substantial personal and organizational cost. A scholar takes years to train; an educational functionary, however, has neither sinecure nor discipline. Given experience and common sense, a leader chosen from one or the other type matters little, but all of us must accept some remit in the choice – now including mine.

The Roome family example of public service, reflected in my parents' own glimmers of civic-mindedness, foretold my efforts on behalf of others. In high school, college, the military, and beyond, I have undertaken blissfully unremunerative work (scholarship is the most obvious) that improved if not elevated the lives of others. At least that was my intent because there was little other reward for these chores. And chores they were, washing dishes at church suppers, canvassing door to door against the war in Vietnam, typing emergency leave papers for a grieving sailor, helping fellow researchers at libraries and archives overseas, writing grants to keep a struggling school afloat, finding jobs for former students – the litany is long and familiar. As self-serving as it is to mention them, these gestures constitute elements of cultural capital – vestigial and habitual elements perhaps, but still substantive, formative, and necessary to the public welfare.

In academe, more sustained service is *sine qua non* to the profession. Someone must chair committees in the department to make new appointments, for example. Someone must advise administrators in their decisions to promote and tenure colleagues; someone must consider ways to save money during a budget crisis; someone must speak up about dysfunctional management. As a member of the faculty, I have done all these things and more. Everyday I encounter people whose teaching I observed, whose job I

saw reassigned, or whose positions I criticized. The university is a small town in need of everyone's contributions.

A term as president of Faculty Senate (1998-1999) taught me the virtues and vices of participatory governance. It was a stormy year of obstinate conflict between SIU president Ted Sanders and SIUC chancellor Jo Ann Argersinger. I watched aghast as these ambitious figures scuffled for the mantle of Delyte Morris's legacy. Sanders sought to align the logistics of the school's three campuses, while Argersinger aimed to establish the autonomy of the university in Carbondale. Despite their defects, these administrative styles, one bureaucratic, the other charismatic, were textbook illustrations of Max Weber's descriptions of alternative institutional leadership. In the end, the chancellor was sacked, the president found another job, and the community was left sharply divided. This pitiful past robbed us of a better future.

In the interim I learned that a serviceable present also comes at a cost. My breakfast meetings with Sanders, for instance, were excruciating. At times I felt we spoke different languages, he embraced so few of my assumptions concerning higher education. When I told Sanders how tenured colleagues at Phillips had committed to working a full semester without pay, if need be, to keep the school open, he was startled. Such a daring gesture, like the dedication of humanists to their texts, was beyond his ken. In response, he enumerated the job offers he declined in order to remain at SIU. I was caught equally breathless by Sanders's boss, A.D. Van Meter, the chairman of the university's Board of Trustees, a banker by trade, who dilated on the responsibilities of governance as if I had no idea; acting on behalf of my peers, I must have threatened his authority. Neither man asked what I did; both thought they knew who I was: "Honni soit qui mal y pense."

Nota Bene:
*The university is a small town in
need of everyone's contributions.*
(page 238)

I was lucky to have been in Berlin when the Faculty Senate, under my successor's guidance, voted no-confidence in President Sanders for firing Chancellor Argersinger (June 1999). I had given my proxy to Kay Carr, then president of the Faculty Association, to deliberate freely with our peers in the Senate about the issue. The collaboration was typical between these two constituencies. That priceless cooperative spirit dissipated as the school's crisis of direction deepened. Internal dissension made matters worse. The interim chancellor, John Jackson (1999-2001), had been appointed by Sanders and so lacked the legitimacy of a regular appointment, which the constituents normally sanction or share in making. However able, Jackson muddled along with the equivocal support of his colleagues, but he did draw a masterful map of land-use for future stewards to construe.

The campus managed begrudging accommodation with Chancellor Walter Wendler (2001-2006), who was less interested in cooperating with others than he was in getting things done. He convened 200 people – magnanimous donors, local business poohbahs, plus faculty, staff, and students – to envisage a strategic plan, which he called Southern at 150 (2004), to put SIUC among the nation's top 75 research institutions by the university's 150th anniversary in 2019. But the document was suspiciously similar to the one for Texas A & M which Wendler had drafted earlier. Inflecting broadly different paths to narrowly different ends, such as the design configurations of Saluki Way, the new SIU President, Glenn Poshard (2006-), wasted little time in dismissing the Texas architect.

We are now on the ninth chancellor, Rita Cheng, in my 19 years at Carbondale. Shared governance has improved modestly. The collective bargaining agreement in 2006 was reached in record time and without acrimony. The Senate and its counterpart, the Graduate Council, which oversees advanced degree programs, play a singular role in the

selection of new hands at the helm. Four percent more faculty members work for the university than did a decade ago. And there seems to be a forthrightness about the school's biggest current problem: given the Illinois government's near bankruptcy, we must bolster a budget based on better enrollments. The question remains: just how effective will be yet another administration hobbled by its self-inflicted wounds?

How About Some Tea?

Since 1999 I have teamed up with others to improve the University Core Curriculum (UCC) required of all SIUC's undergraduates. It is what we ask our students to experience irrespective of their majors: the foundation skills of math, speech, and composition; the disciplinary breadth of the natural and life sciences, social sciences, humanities, fine arts, and human health; and the integrated study of multiculturalism and interdisciplinarity. Other universities call this curricular collection "general studies," "general education," or "distribution requirements." But the UCC is actually a structured sequence of courses conceived and delivered by the faculty in their respective disciplines. So it has its own troupe of capable, zealous, and vocal advocates.

The gap between the ideal and the real yawns wide, revealing a space that every institution must necessarily face. It is an enormous operation: every semester nearly ten thousand people are registered in one or more course from an instructional staff of 750. The classes themselves are offered by more than 35 different departments, which also oversee coursework for graduate students and undergraduate majors as well as seed scholarly research. The Core is just one of a department's many duties. Consequently, much of its delivery is assigned to young, inexperienced term-lecturers and graduate assistants. For a third of them, the UCC is their first academic job. For another third

of them, it is their last.

Here lies the biggest challenge for the Core: sustaining the university's engagement with its most vulnerable learners in a curriculum that is no one's first priority. Other institutions, especially smaller, private ones like Phillips, focus their mission on the first-year experience because that is their primary purpose: to reach undergraduates. A larger, state entity like SIUC must balance this activity with its other obligations: to promote the research and creativity of its faculty, to train its professional and graduate students, and to be of use to the region in which it is located. As a result, limited means are spread across many commitments critical to the school's complex apparatus. To fulfill its charge, the UCC must thus compete with various other mandates.

It is no easy task. Busy administrative leaders, such as my boss, the provost, allocate nothing specifically for the Core. There is no one official with sole purview for its staffing. A mere instructor, the director, must remind the chief academic officer of the school's debt to the myriad of people it serves. For the two colleges delivering, together, three-fourths of the program, Liberal Arts and Science, the deans are cooperative. They have an obvious stake in the UCC. The other college deans, however, are less exercised and their oversight is accordingly less attentive – until they perceive an opportunity to expand their budget by offering more courses at the entry level. Would you believe tax accounting, computer programming, or engineering economics?

The entire system manages its mindless mediocrity, thank heavens, with the money students bring with them. Because of the Illinois's recent "Truth in Tuition" legislation, which guarantees each entering cohort the same annual fees for five years, the youngest and newest "clientele" end up paying the most (the only chance universities

Comment [4]: Water, Water... Everywhere

To be fair, the vast majority of my SIUC colleagues thoroughly enjoy teaching undergraduates. So it was no challenge whatsoever for me to recruit some of them to design an interdisciplinary course, the work on which was funded by a training grant from the US Department of Agriculture in 2003 (we shared the award with Mississippi State University). The money went to a team of scholars in six different programs – from agricultural education to political science – for them to ponder, in class and online, the implications of water in their respective fields of inquiry. For fifteen weeks in Fall 2004, I witnessed first-hand the intense engagement of students and instructors at their very best in the classroom. Like water itself, teaching and learning at every level can elevate. It was an inspiration to watch. And to think that it was all just to satisfy a requirement in the University Core Curriculum....

now have to pass on costs is with each new wave of freshmen). If we fail to retain them, we lose a large portion of their revenue, which is increasingly tuition driven. *Ergo*, the better we teach our first- and second-year classes, the more likely they will continue their studies and provide the resources we need to educate them. After decades of relative disregard, the most at-risk among us are at last the cynosure of our concern. Or as John Dewey wrote in another context, “all that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members.”

Although this logic may seem painfully obvious outside the academy, it is not at all obvious inside it. Universities, the public ones in particular, are sheltered from the vagaries of the marketplace because citizens require reliable, essential services. Higher education fosters a more productive workforce from which everyone benefits, not just the graduates themselves. But because taxpayers no longer subsidize their institutions as they used to – the legislature appropriates barely 25 percent of SIUC’s operating budget each fiscal year – we must find other funding to function; so tuition-paying students are more important than ever. For their trade, state schools compete directly with each other as well as with their private counterparts. In an increasingly competitive enterprise, the Core is one way we can distinguish ourselves with inventive dispatch.

The prerequisite is a well-marketed matter of quality. As director I can do little about marketing, but I strive hard for quality, or at least its perception. Every semester I ask instructors participating in the UCC to report on their courses. They share copies of their syllabi, handouts, assignments, and examinations; and they document students’ achievement of the learning objectives and the changes to the course this achievement implies. As you can imagine, such oversight is intrusive and not always welcomed by

busy staff. But the vast majority of my colleagues enter into this exercise with justifiable pride. My visits with them to review the courses they teach, including classroom observations by invitation, are welcomed because an informed peer cares about what they do. I have nothing to offer them but my sincere interest in their pedagogical practices. Their reward is not material or venal – at times I wish it were – but professional, moral, and salutary.

Can we do better? In fact, yes. We can train our instructors, especially the least experienced of them, more effectively than we do. We can integrate our curriculum so related courses are taught more collaboratively. We can create more living-learning communities to help students talk with each other about the courses they are taking together. We can afford much better support – academic advisement, supplemental instruction, and tutoring services – for everyone who needs it. After several years of benign neglect of entry-level classes, the Core needs more quality control. It must check faculty indifference and serve as a corrective in our work with undergraduates who struggle to make the difficult transition from high school to the university. My most sanguine moments at SIUC have been in making this seminal liminality more bearable.

6

Another project I have undertaken with trepidation is SIUC's University Honors Program (UHP). Like the University Core Curriculum, the UHP is in everyone's interest – the best students enliven the entire institution – but it is no one's job, except perhaps the director's, to deal with such curious circumstances. When I arrived, the Honors office was on the third floor of Faner Hall, hidden so only folks seeking faculty in Sociology, Linguistics, or History could find it, mostly by accident. The assistant director in charge

of major scholarship advisement claimed another Faner office that flooded every time it rained. Twenty years of archives – student publications among them – filled one of the five rooms intended for three academic professionals, a civil service employee, and two part-time workers; the busiest of hives was provided the tiniest of spaces.

With annual financing of just \$64,000, enhanced by the *pro bono* instruction by two or three additional faculty members, the UHP offered seven courses a term, which allowed a privileged few to fulfill Core requirements. Affiliation with Honors was strictly voluntary. All students had to do to join was to maintain a 3.25 grade point average – just under half of all undergraduates qualified – and to fill out a one-page application – it took less than a minute. The coursework proffered by inspiring teachers was discretionary, as was attendance to sponsored lectures and the breakfasts with guest luminaries such as Jonathan Miller, David Levy, and John Updike. Of the seven thousand eligible undergraduates, only a thousand bothered to sign up; fewer than 250 of them enrolled in a UHP course, and just ten graduated each year with a UHP degree. The students were as hard to find as the office.

The shepherd for 19 years, Rick Williams, waxed weary of running a makeshift operation and retired in 2006. Because the provost preferred to dither and I was willing to work gratis, I became Rick's interim replacement. But I did not come cheap. In two years, the program secured ample new quarters in the remodeled Morris Library – 2,500 square feet for a designated classroom, offices, and, to be sure, storage of the twenty years of archives, though most of them were shipped elsewhere on campus. Provisions were made for a full-time director as well as an associate and an assistant. The Honors curriculum expanded to include many majors as well as the Core. There were added ben-

efits to compensate for mandatory participation – a minimum of one UHP course per semester – such as first choice in housing assignments in the residence halls, early registration, and special recognition on the transcript and the diploma at graduation. I estimate that my time on behalf of SIUC’s brightest kids cost an extra \$100,000 a year. Given the return on the investment, is that so bad?

In retrospect, I realize now, my attention to the Core and Honors was an ironic turn from my undergraduate aspirations. It is hard to believe that the only requirements for the AB degree at Brown were a mere 32 courses, eight of them in a major. There were no hours to count, no foundation skills, disciplinary knowledge, or integrative studies to master, no first-year experience to live, and no honors courses to take. As an undergraduate, I needed rules, conventions if you will, but I established them myself, as personal goals; I did not suffer them as institutional strictures. In fact, had I attended SIUC then, I would have thrived in the experimental problem-based learning in the UCC and in the voluntary version of the UHP, both of them victims of my second thoughts as to their value to very different audience in a very different context. Our students learn in a much more tightly structured educational environment, one I would have shunned if not scorned years ago.

Universities must be held more accountable as a public good. Even though less than a third of SIUC’s annual budget comes from legislative appropriations, it operates on behalf of the state, albeit in its southernmost region. More than 80 percent of its students are Illinoisans, and most of them will continue to live and pay taxes as Illinoisans. Our mission thus has ramifications that extend far beyond a private school’s more circumscribed obligations. Accordingly, SIUC functions under additional scrutiny, as well it

should. We must prove to the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, our principal accrediting agency, that we are fit to award degrees. Our many stakeholders – legislators, taxpayers, parents, students, alumni, employers, donors, vendors, faculty, and staff – all expect more than a prestigious profile; they require results.

John Gardner was right: the university’s quest for *gravitas* undermines its creativity and innovation. But that is a small tribute to pay, I think, for its integrity and responsibility. The documentation of what is taught and what is actually learned has been my charge for the past several years, first for the University Core Curriculum, then for all academic outcomes. At least my *ad hoc* role as acting director of University Assessment (2005-) has reminded my colleagues of the need to demonstrate how well their programs are working. “Assessment,” a technical term better known as “standards” in primary and secondary schools, is the collaboration of instructors to measure, in some fashion, the impact of their teaching. By the time students finish their degrees, they must know and be able to do more than when they began. As Ernest Boyer noted back in 1987, “Measuring the outcome of a college education, in the end, is an assessment of the institution.” This summary judgment is even more relevant today.

Every eight years, the faculty study their degree programs and report the upshot to the IBHE and their own accrediting agencies. Every ten years, the university examines everything it does and presents its findings to the HLC. Even athletics must comply with the NCAA. In so doing, we remain transparent and thereby retain the public’s trust in our mission to serve the state. Or, to put the matter more emphatically, we can always be improving our scholarship, our pedagogy, and our service to a larger constituency.

Comment [5]: “Southern at 140”

One of my prouder accomplishments has been coordinating the university’s successful re-accreditation effort in 2008-10. The process began with a massive self-study of all seven colleges, including the schools of medicine and law, which offer 101 undergraduate, 74 masters, and 32 professional and doctoral degrees to some 20,000 students. Following the five criteria established by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the 368-page document evaluates every aspect of our mission, planning, instruction, research, and service. The self-study demonstrates, I think, just how well we fulfill our commitments to stakeholders everywhere. Such is SIUC at its 140th anniversary (2009), hence the self-study’s subtitle “Southern at 140.”

the longer we take to respond, the less we need to write; and without the auto-correct function, we risk projecting a virtual parapraxis or other digital sublimation.)

The university is rich in cultural capital. Its biggest bounty lies in the phenomenal resources of its well-trained and creative faculty, and we do our best to recruit and acculturate them carefully to academia because they are invariably with us for a long time. Their specialties are sharply focused to the exclusion of all other concerns, which makes such expertise moderately inflexible, a meager price to pay for the extraordinary wealth of their work as scholars and artists, as teachers and mentors, as colleagues in service to the profession. Psychologists like David Gilbert are exploring the sources of nicotine addiction, engineers like Max Yen are developing practical applications of nano-technology, and painters like Najjar Abdul-Musawwir are animating new forms in color. Their students are learning extraordinary things from them, and their contributions to the wider world are inestimable.

All is not sweetness and light. It is hard to overlook the misuse of the school's assets by perfectly innocuous administrators; they squander time and treasure on such fastidious frivolities as tidying up office space, handwriting official communiqués, belittling the efforts of subordinates, redesigning logos and letterheads – I have seen it all. Faculty, too, star in some Ziegfeld follies of their own: literary scholars prepping for marathons, attorneys vying for local public office, and engineers dabbling in recreational litigation – not always on behalf of others. At times, we deserve the pointed parodies that David Lodge, Richard Russo, and Kingsley Amis have written of our self-anointed special pleaders; the pompously irritating Professor Welch – the “incurable evader” foiled by his understudy in Amis's Lucky Jim – highlights their legendary circumlocutions.

Viewed from another country, better yet from another continent, the university's comedy plays to a small, fickle audience. While some players act out their petty parts, the rest of the cast remains on a much larger stage represented by Morris library. The library embodies the best SIUC has to offer well beyond its proscenium, not just to itself but to the world. I am astonished how forcefully it projects, wherever we are, in Paris and Freiburg as well as in Carbondale, via the Internet. Information technology has virtually thrust the school far from southern Illinois. The web has granted higher education a global presence. My contacts overseas are as convenient and as insistent as my e-mail can make them. Not long ago it took less than an hour to assemble a panel on Freemasonry for a conference in Paris. In the process, it mattered not one wit where I was or what else I did.

Scholarship and creative activities are no longer of small-town, parochial, anti-quarian interest. Their implications are immediately felt abroad, just as the results of work further afield are felt in Carbondale. The institution's physical location is immaterial. International communication and transportation have created a universal network of professional and personal relationships, now an everyday reality, so that colleagues and students from every continent are right at hand. The university embraces nearly all nations, all cultures, all peoples. We may speak one form of English, but I am grateful that we do not command all its forms. We still have languages, our own among them, to learn from those in our very midst. As Montaigne observed of his goodly experience, "nostre contestation est verbale," that is to say, the distance in our personal relations is not spatial but semantic.

One's coordinates remain fixed. When my wife and I are abroad, Europeans often ask from where we hail, though they generally ask where we are headed (it is more polite and they are more likely to know something about places closer by). Our response is the country whose passport we carry, but we prefer to tell our interlocutors that home lies in the woods of southern Illinois. Its charm is a pleasure to recall and share with others who love natural beauty, too. Our mail is delivered to Carbondale, but we live in Makanda township just to the south, across the road from the national forest. Makanda proper, population 419, has just five nondescript shops, a Masonic lodge, Town Hall, and Baptist church on the far side of the railroad tracks, a stone's throw from the one-horse post office and Alan Stuck's jewelry studio. The Giant City State Park nearby attracts autumnal travelers to see the foliage. Further afield are assorted enclaves of houses built by university employees and their families. Such is our pastoral Union Hill.

Anne and I live in an intense and enchanted viridity, right through the summer months. A bright, light chartreuse in the first tiny willow leaves contrasts sharply with deep, dark, folded fronds of the cedars. Walnuts, maples, sassafras, black oaks, and choke cherries fill out the verdant shades between them. Out back on our three acres, with no adjacent house in sight, several dozen different, readily identifiable species of plant life compete for the sun and our attention, it seems, in the ever-changing play of light and dark. For nearly half the year, the woods are tropically luxuriant in the Mississippi delta that reaches up into the land of little Egypt, as the region here is dubbed – no one knows why. The arboreal landscape is less like the Nile than the Amazon.

The tree trunks stand out in the stark, virile winters. Without upper-canopy or undergrowth, the woods brandish their inner recesses of varied shades, this time of

Nota Bene:
As art historian Kenneth Clark remarked, "all living things are our brothers and sisters."
(page 254)

browns. Each tree's bark is another hue, from the off-white of the smoothest sycamores to the stippled shades of the blackest locust. The mocha leaves blanket what little green rests beneath the empty branches, "bare ruined choirs" in their arching from one wooded pilaster to another. The only hints of the summer left or to come are the line of loblollies standing downhill to the pond below, which freezes over to a soft silver for about five weeks every year. Around the house the yellowed meadow weeds have encroached in every flowerbed; they never disappear, it seems, however much they are pulled or sprayed; the vetch, foxtails, clover, wild chives, and dandelions are a life-force year round.

The forest's lushest tones are reserved for spring and autumn. Clothed in fresh foliage, as Mark Twain described it, the hills are "a gracious and worthy setting." More discreet in its display is the carpet of wildflowers, whose names vary from one county to the next. Anne and I know them as snowbells, foxgloves, wake robins, bluebonnets, may apples, and Queen Anne's lace, which also blossom briefly before they fade into the low-lying growth around them. Even in their glory they are easy to overlook, especially in the fall when a far less subtle transformation takes its turn. Everyone's favorite season, despite its vulgarity, passes in less than a month. As the trees lose their multi-colored cover, clouds of red and orange drift *deça, delà, à la Verlaine* in the barest breeze.

The animals are no less evident in the woods. The herds of ravenous deer are veritable pests whose sudden, magical appearance near the house never ceases to mystify. Almost every night, safe in their soundly sleeping human company, they settle down with a thump against our bedroom wall. The squirrels hop in annoyance at the crows, which have wandered tauntingly close to caches of walnuts buried in the grass. The flighty bluebirds keep their distance from the assertive jays. Each May, for just a week or two, the

flashy red, bandit-eyed cardinals call their mates in a series of “thirty-twos” followed by a varying number of chirp-chirp-chirps. Pairs of feral woodchuck, opossum, skunk, or rabbit will burrow beneath the breezeway to the garage; it provides them refuge from predatory carnivores: foxes, hawks, and bobcats.

Whatever befalls these beasts, they all have names: the rabbits Larry and Mary, the crows Joe and Flo, the bluebirds Hoppy and Happy, the cardinals Molly and Red-bandit, and, most elegant of all, the tortoise Principessa Tortellini e Spaghetti who climbs uphill from the pond each spring for the wild strawberries, which grow beneath the nearest persimmon tree. Only the deer carry no civilizing monikers; there are too many of them, as opposed to the rapidly dwindling numbers of birds whose habitats are lost to real estate development, pesticides, climate change, and the West Nile virus. In fifteen years, we have seen a loss of more than half the bird life in our trees. The number of species remains well short of the 101 Thomas Jefferson identified in Virginia. Alas, so much for our stewardship of God’s creation: “and, behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1.31).

6

The local flora and fauna include our other neighbors, as likely as not, our colleagues at the university. They are as dear to us as the woods, but not as retiring. When we first arrived from Oklahoma one hot muggy May with our truckload of worldly belongings, Sandy Johnson from next door visited with a bouquet of wildflowers and an invitation for dinner. Anne and I were touched, but we found this benevolent gesture impossible to reciprocate with her two hyperactive children, one of whom sang for us loudly off-key and the other toyed at length with sharp pointed objects. Futile, paternal admonishments thundered through the trees almost as clearly as Mark Johnson’s “Zeus

mobile,” which backfired each morning at 7:45 as this prominent philosopher headed to his office. The Johnsons’s departure for Eugene, Oregon, was thus bittersweet, just as have been those of all our companions summoned from this tight-knit Arcardia.

We cherish the tight community of extraordinary people from all over. The Ethiopian mathematician, the Hungarian attorney, the Iranian engineer, the French specialist in comparative literature, and other figures just as alien to the wilderness will offer up their wealth of wit and wisdom during walks around the loop that serves as a local roadway. A railroad engine driver, a county parole officer, a manager of the mental health facility – all of them retired – have lived long enough in southern Illinois to resemble natives, like my fine friend and language partner Frank Gunderson, a true Illinoisan whose past parts are worth discussing in French every Friday. The men who remodeled our house, when they were not fishing or hunting, have regaled us with their songs and stories. In a tradition enriched by T.S. Eliot, a former feature of the region, our forest teems with exotica.

After each trip, no matter how short, Anne and I feel relieved to be home back home. Such relief is the expression of what we have become, midwesterners by adoption, but also of what we now believe about the space we claim in the world, environmentalists by default. We have made way for modulations of our own. Clearing the woods to live in them creates a new ecosystem for plants and animals who, like ourselves, were not here originally. We share in the delicate interplay of natural life in the forest. The crickets, ants, and spiders, whether creeping or crawling, are at ease with us; and although we do not always find them quite proper, we should. They are adapting to their altered surroundings; they are faring even better than we: there are legions more of them.

253: Act 6

Comment [6]: Local Color

Among the more colorful characters in southern Illinois are our carpenter Tom Grant, our house painter Mike Donlea, and our housekeeper Pam Loyd. While remodeling the kitchen in 1991, Tom told an amusing anecdote of his “heathen” dog, which escaped the house each night to roll in the fish guts it had buried down by the pond. Mike entertained us with accounts of his encounters with the crows he chased away with bottle rockets; his taste in music tended to a distinctly bawdy version of country-western. And Pam took care of our house while we were away for long periods and shared the intermittent indiscretions of her hard-scrabble life; she always reminded me of my grandparents’ Irish help, Henrietta Furlong. Tom, Mike, and Pam, of course, are “natives” only because they have lived here somewhat longer than Anne and I have.

As art historian Kenneth Clark once remarked, “all living things are our brothers and sisters.” We are responsible for such creatures, not just our own flesh and blood. At home, as infants, we learned to develop a sense of otherness, beginning with mother and then with father and siblings. At school, as children, we differentiated ourselves from classmates and our parents from teachers. Eventually, as young adults, we came to judge our own family, most often unwisely, well before we sensed the compassion we owe to others, especially the less fortunate. Eventually we turned that critical-cum-moral consciousness outward as well as inward to understand ourselves more fully in community, in the nation, in the world, on the planet. Our present duties include nature itself, the plants and animals around us, but also the land and climate that shape our lives together.

If we fail our larger moral calling, more than Thoreau’s oracles from Walden Pond will remind us. We will suffer the consequences, sometimes immediately, as New Orleans experienced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The culpability for this fiasco is multiple. Relatives and neighbors neglected each other; the city, the parish, the state, the country, and beyond watched in horror and then looked elsewhere to blame. The disregard was universal. Nearly half of the population remains far from home; vast wetlands are still submerged. The social and environmental catastrophes are of a piece; and we are all implicated wherever we live, so long as we continue to use up precious natural resources and pollute the water and air that affect the atmosphere we inhabit. After all, the country’s entire heartland draws its sustenance from the Mississippi watershed.

6

After each morning’s run, as often as not, I prepare for class. My favorite course to teach is “Art, Music, and Ideas in the Western World,” from prehistory to the present.

As a colleague once put it acerbically, it is a survey “as deep as piss on a tin plate.” In fifteen weeks I cover five thousand years of western culture, which comes to more than a century of creative achievement in the arts and humanities every fifty minutes. The only reason I must ready for class is not to remember everything – how could I? – but to select whatever merits my students’ attention. The easiest choices are my favorite artifacts arranged in chronological order, chapter by chapter, in William Fleming’s gorgeous textbook. *Cela va tout seul*.

My course satisfies a fine arts requirement in the University Core Curriculum, so most of my charges are captives of the program I administer. Very few of them will ever study this material in more depth, and yet plenty of them will chance to ponder its implications. Western culture is ubiquitous – on TV, in film, on the web – available by iPods, cellphones, and laptops in and around familiar architectural motifs. If nearly all literary and philosophical texts are beyond my students’ everyday experience, certain concepts and phrases from the canon will occur to them, whether or not they realize it. The descendants of immigrants from more than 120 countries, not just from Europe and its former colonies, will recognize something of their distant homes in this subject.

Ever so briefly, the blasé sons and daughters of hard-working bricklayers, secretaries, and sales associates find themselves in my class. I am often peeved by their provocative indifference, but occasionally inspired by their sudden interest beyond themselves and their present circumstances. When they sit for their final examinations, I feel an intensity of purpose that transcends their initial limitations and promises awareness of better things for them. Deep in thought, however flickering it might be, they are on the cusp of realizing how to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste another culture, of acquiring

perhaps a firmer sense of possibilities now within their ken. Their awakening to halcyon days and ways still humbles me.

Usually before I have graded the exams, still hopeful that my pupils had actually learned something, I attend commencement. A mood of expectancy gathers during the academic procession, the faculty in full regalia, the students seated quietly by college, and their families ranged restlessly in the arena around us. I see it in the graduates' faces as they march across the stage, the proudest strutting triumphantly, arms raised, to the cacophony of loved ones shouting in enthusiasm. Although I recognize very few of them – my eighty students a term are engulfed by the four thousand who finish every year – I am heartened by their accomplishment: they have access to the vast store of cultural capital that a university, indeed a civilization, represents. They are demonstrably better primed to make the most of it.

My students remind me of the 1983 film adaptation of Willy Russell's play, Ed-ucating Rita, about a hairdresser's coming of age in working-class Britain. Rita took up Immanuel Kant's challenge, first issued by Horace and reformulated by Michel Foucault: "sapere aude," dare to know! By the time she had finished her degree in an "open" university akin to SIUC, Rita had changed. She donned new clothes, assumed another name, spoke with assurance despite her personal doubts, and, best of all, no longer needed her old English professor. It is much the same with these young people who spare their time with me in and out of class. Briefly they are my Rita-Susan, my Liza Doolittle, my Galatea, but eventually they all elude my embrace to venture forth on their own.

Once in a while I see one of them, like some episodic sea gull astray from the flyway, taking a turn around Campus Lake, feeling the exhilaration I do from the region's

vernal weather. We share a voluptuously vicarious kinship. A sixth sense underlies our rich and varied connection with far-off lands and times. As Cardinal Newman once said, "you cannot learn to converse till you have the world to converse with." So it seems to me after fifty years of running various routes to this particular discovery. In its un-Homeric grandeur, my modest odyssey has meant a freighted displacement from the ocean to this clearing in the woods and its confluence of migrating life, from everywhere to here and now, as I pause from my exertions at 37°42'26.9"N 89°13'30.8"W.

1:08:47 pm GMT
Thursday, October 14, 2010

Dialogue with John Gardner

JG: *"You don't seem to know who I am."*

JSA: *"You're right, Mr. Gardner, we've not met. But I've read some of your work, and there are folks here who knew you."*

JG: *"They must be old as dirt and as batty as Grendel's besotted mother. It's been a while since I was in Carbondale. I didn't keep much company there. I was too busy writing."*

JSA: *"All the same, it's clear that southern Illinois made an impression. Many of the landscapes your novels describe resemble the Shawnee National Forest."*

JG: *"Yes, I liked biking the back roads around town. It finally killed me in New York, you know. But there were truly breathtaking scenes near Carbondale, and I don't mean the university's Thompson Woods. Despite my backhanded compliments, I did like the place. It's too bad my colleagues had it in for me. They must have thought I was a creepy miscreant lurching lamely to his lair."*

JSA: *"I can't rightly say. But you were noticed."*

JG: *"Well, as I once wrote, 'even a monster's blood-lust can be stifled by such talk.' So you could have been more laudatory in your bromide of a book. We really did raise holy hell back in the Morris years. Since then, the wing-nuts at SIU – the white supremacists and the psychotic cross-dressers – have had nothing on me."*

JSA: *"People remember all too well."*

JG: *"They need to just stop living in the past. As a medievalist, I know what it's like to relive history, but I never got stuck there the way some folks did, like David Derge. Nice name for a keen, huh?"*

JSA: *“And the students, Mr. Gardner? Weren’t they important to you?”*

JG: *“I guess so. I didn’t have any more time for them than I had for colleagues. I had other things in mind. I’m sure my ex-wife can fill in the gory details.”*

JSA: *“What were you trying to accomplish at SIU?”*

JG: *“I saw myself teaching the infinite sadness of our lives. You don’t have to live in Carbondale to understand. You could be anywhere in the world to realize that modernity is no better than earlier periods in our history. If anything, it is a whole lot worse. Modernists like Gertrude Stein knew that ‘there’s no there there’ here any more. That’s what I wanted my students everywhere to learn and to write on.”*

JSA: *“Did you succeed?”*

JG: *“Hell, no, but at least I died trying.”*

JSA: *“That must be the chief difference between us then, because I’d infinitely rather live trying. That way, one has more time to finish the job, right?”*

JG: *“I finished it all right. A dozen books, many of them bestsellers, will do almost anyone in.”*

JSA: *“Like J. Alfred Prufrock, I’ll part my hair behind and eat a peach instead, Mr. Gardner. The sirens at the beach are waiting for me in my flannel trousers.”*

JG: *“You just do that – and enjoy it. When you get done, go write about how much worse it was back in the Middle Ages, when the mechanisms of contemporary life had yet to be invented.... It’s such fun to taunt an historian.”*

JSA: *“Yes, isn’t it?”*